



THE WHITE HOUSE CALLED RED ROCKS



*A lasting memorial to William Allen White,
his family, his legacy, his time.*

by Julie A. Pope

Almost as soon as he hit town in 1895, William Allen White, local owner, publisher, and editor of the *Emporia Gazette*, became a striking and familiar figure on the streets of downtown Emporia. His broad smile was quick, his eyes discerning, his resolve firm. He began as just another newspaper man, but after purchasing the *Gazette* from William Yoast Morgan, White and his daily rose to prominence with the nationwide publication of White's 1896 anti-Populist editorial "What's the Matter with Kansas?" The unexpected attention garnered by this piece brought White and his family into greater contact with important visitors, friends, and neighbors.



William Allen White and his wife, Sallie, stand together in front of Red Rocks, their residence at 927 Exchange Street in Emporia. In his autobiography, William Allen wrote of their home: “Sallie and I were tremendously proud of it — towers, turrets, tumors and all. We used to walk up and down the sidewalk in the summer twilight admiring it.”

White, his wife, Sallie, and his mother, Mary, had been renting a modest house in Emporia since their arrival, but within a few years they realized they needed a larger home in which to entertain members of their new circle. Their attention turned to a lovely large home, built by Almerin Gillett, at 927 Exchange Street.

Gillett and his new wife, Chloe, had moved to Emporia in 1866. After their arrival, Gillett, much like White, obtained a position of considerable prominence in the community. He opened a law practice and later became Emporia city clerk, Lyon County attorney, state senator, and a Kansas railroad commissioner. In addition, he became a cattle rancher and an officer of the Kansas and New England Land and Cattle Company of Emporia.

In the late 1880s Gillett built his new home at 927 Exchange Street. No floor plans have been found, but photographs show the large Queen Anne-style house to have had multiple chimneys, a wraparound porch on the first floor, and sleeping porches on the second and third floors. Leaded-glass windows added to the elegance. Locally it was known as “Red Rocks” because of the red sandstone Gillett had shipped from Colorado to construct the first floor. Sandstone made the house unique, since Kansas limestone served as the basis for most other local structures.

But as with most people who depended on the land for a large portion of their income, Gillett’s fortunes suffered as the

Kansas landscape entered drought conditions. Cattle prices plunged, leaving Gillett unable to pay his mortgage and taxes on several properties. Authorities stepped in and foreclosed on Red Rocks on May 31, 1889. Local oral histories tell that Mrs. Gillett, despondent over her husband’s business debts and failures, hanged herself in Red Rocks in 1892. Now destitute, Almerin Gillett left Emporia and moved to Kansas City, where he died in 1896. In August 1898 Lyon County sold the house at auction to Clarence Thompson of Connecticut. Thompson put the house up for rent, and the Whites, who had long admired the building, moved in in 1899. The following June, son William Lindsay was born.

Not long afterward, William Allen learned that Clarence Thompson had expressed an interest in selling Red Rocks. The idea of purchasing the home appealed to White, but his financial situation suggested otherwise. In an attempt to work out the payments, White wrote a letter to his friend John S. Phillips, managing editor of *McClure’s Magazine*, and requested a loan to purchase the home. With Phillips’s help, the Whites signed for Red Rocks in May 1901. They also secured the lots immediately south of their property and resold them to Mary White for no profit. White’s mother continued to

live in Red Rocks until a home was constructed for her on the lot, around 1904. The Whites also had a daughter, Mary Katherine, in June 1904. The young children spent much of their time running between the two houses.

William Allen White considered Red Rocks a home in every respect, and he wrote of it in his autobiography:

It was in July, 1899, that Sallie and I moved into the house where we now live. We bought it of the man who held the mortgage, who took it out of the bad debts of an eastern insurance company. It was a ten-room house made of red sandstone from Colorado and pressed bricks. It was covered with towers and turrets and fibroid tumors and minarets and all the useless ornaments that an architect...could think of. An Emporia lawyer-politician built it. When he started the house he was, as many well-to-do western lawyers often were, a heavy investor in cattle. Before the house was completed, cattle prices dropped and he went broke. Mechanics’ liens covered the house. His wife was well-beloved. . . . She died just as the house was finished, amidst the filing of liens and while he was staving off the foreclosure of the mortgage, which was plastered upon the place...The lawyer’s three daughters had a sad time of it. It was a house of heartbreak. When we bought the house the colored people, who lived not far off, called it the haunted house. It was accursed. Two or three tenants had died in it. And the man who sold it to

RIGHT: The living room in the renovated William Allen White house contains many items the Whites collected on their travels worldwide. BELOW RIGHT: This second-floor guest bedroom is thought to have hosted the U.S. presidents who, during their visits to Kansas, stayed with the Whites.



us for six thousand dollars thought he had a famous bargain. Sallie and I were tremendously proud of it — towers, turrets, tumors and all. We used to walk up and down the sidewalk in the summer twilight admiring it with “wonder, awe and praise.” Here the children were born. Here we have seen the major pageant of our lives pass. Here we have lived, indeed happily ever after.

The Whites loved to entertain in their grand new surroundings. They held their first formal dinner at Red Rocks in honor of William Dean Howells in 1899. A fiction writer and one of White’s literary heroes, Howells had come to Emporia to lecture on November 9. Curious neighbors came by the house throughout the day to see the progress of the elaborate preparations. One person provided a dozen quails for the main course. To assist with the serving, the Whites hired a servant girl for the evening but soon discovered that “you just can’t get good help these days.” As the dinner progressed, the young girl grew overwhelmed with the many courses to be brought to the table and, unbeknownst to the hosts, slipped out the kitchen door, not to return. Mrs. McCown, a neighbor, saved the Whites from certain embarrassment: with a nod and a wink and some great good will, she served the rest of the dinner. White recalled, “After the mince pie was served with the cheese, Mrs. McCown was invited to sit down. . . . whereupon [she] explained what had happened in the kitchen, and that final course was the best of the evening. And how Howells enjoyed it!”

The first U.S. president to visit the White family at Red Rocks came in 1912: it was Theodore Roosevelt, during his campaign on the new progressive “Bull Moose” ticket. Roosevelt and his son Emlen arrived on a Saturday night and spent much



of Sunday enjoying the visit to the town. White accompanied Roosevelt to church in a horse-drawn carriage. After services they returned to Red Rocks for a family Sunday dinner of fried



William Allen White kept an impressive library in his home, and he was himself an avid reader and writer. He is shown below on his seventieth birthday, February 10, 1938.



Courtesy Emporia State University

chicken and mashed potatoes and gravy. Sallie White recalled, “Teddy Roosevelt would eat anything you set before him. He liked good food and knew good food, but he was so terribly interested in the conversation he rarely knew whether he was eating celery or custard.” Roosevelt took an hour nap before spending the rest of the afternoon on the porch reading the newspaper and discussing politics in front of the living room fireplace.

Before they knew it, the Whites had lived at Red Rocks for fifteen years. They couldn’t bear to give up their home, but their social circles had grown to include people of national and international importance, and Red Rocks afforded neither the space nor the elegance they needed to entertain properly. They made the decision, therefore, to expand and update their home. White wanted to hire the best and the brightest available architect at that time. In 1915 he wrote to a Chicago acquaintance, architect Frank Lloyd Wright, who enjoyed an international reputation for nontraditional architecture. He and William Allen corresponded through 1917 about renovations to the house, with the architect making at least one visit to Red Rocks. Although Wright drew many plans for it, he was not hired to carry out the renovations. It is believed that the Whites and Wright could not come to an agreement on a new design of the house.

More than two years later, in 1919, William Allen White contacted Wight & Wight, a Kansas City architectural firm. White was familiar with their work in the Mission Hills and Country Club districts. William Drewin Wight visited Red Rocks, and by Christmas that same year the Whites had a new floor plan for their home. And, as it turned out, not any too soon: in January 1920, before the renovations began, a spark

from one of the house’s many chimneys started a fire on the roof of Red Rocks while the Whites were dining. Flames destroyed the third floor of the home. Neighbors came to the aid of the Whites, who quickly moved out until the house was remodeled.

Renovations to Red Rocks began in March 1920 under the close supervision of William Allen and Sallie. The Wight design retained much from the Frank Lloyd Wright plans but incorporated the Whites’ wishes also. The former Queen Anne changed to a Tudor Revival-style. The house entrance moved from Exchange Street to Tenth Avenue and featured a one-story gabled porch. Workers enlarged the home from ten rooms to eleven, with four full baths and two half-baths. They added dormers on the north and south sides of the third floor and enclosed the sleeping porches, including the area that became White’s office. The present terraced garden, pergola, and lily pool also first appeared during the renovation. White took particular interest in the living room fireplace. “I have here in Emporia a lot of very

beautiful white foundation stone—Carthage stone—left over from the trim on my garage building. . . . It might do well for a mantel, if white stone can be used.” Sallie contributed ideas as well. She wanted the second floor west bedroom as a suite with a sitting room to the north. She ordered French doors in the dining room with a stone terrace immediately outside. She also had the main entrance hall lowered and covered with tile, creating a step up into the living room.

Great tragedy befell the Whites before the house was completed. Mary Katherine, their sixteen-year-old daughter, suffered serious injuries in a horseback riding accident. William Allen was out of town on business at the time, and Sallie notified him by telegram. She sounded optimistic and encouraged White to continue his trip to Atlantic City as planned. Before long, however, Mary’s condition worsened, and Sallie reluctantly sent a second telegram urging her husband to return home immediately.



ABOVE: Sallie White descends the staircase into the foyer of the White home, ca. 1940. Through the door at the back is a second staircase that leads to the second and third floors. Daughter Mary Katherine White (above right) designed a bedroom for herself on the third floor, but she died in a tragic riding accident before she could move into the room.

The *Emporia Daily Gazette*, Thursday, May 12, 1921, stated, “The condition of Miss Mary White, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. W. A. White, who was seriously injured in a fall from a horse Tuesday, is not improved today. The doctor attending her has requested that friends do not call at the house or telephone as she is in a downstairs room and noise disturbs her.” On Friday, May 13, as White stopped in Chicago to change trains on his return to Emporia, his



Mary Katherine White

friends Edna Ferber and Harold Ickes met him to inform him of Mary’s death. White recalled in his autobiography, “It was a long, sad, agonizing journey home. The Santa Fe stopped the train for me at Exchange Street so that I should not have to go clear to the station, and there Sallie met me. . . . Bill [William Lindsay] came home from Harvard a few hours later. The day after the funeral I knew that I must write something about Mary. Sallie and I walked down to the *Gazette* office together, and I hammered out her obituary. We went over it together, and revised it three times in the proof before the type was put into the forms. I had said my say and felt eased in my soul.”

The tribute to Mary helped begin the healing process, and the renovation of Red Rocks continued to completion. By autumn of 1921 the Whites, without their dear Mary, had settled back in their 927 Exchange Street home. The quiet garden and reflecting pool provided very different surroundings for them, and they began entertaining visitors again as they always had.

As the Whites’ fame grew, so did the numbers of their friends, and their entertaining became legendary. In July 1927 the Whites hosted one of their more famous gatherings: a dinner garden party in honor of Herbert Hoover, whom they supported as the Republican nominee for U.S. president the following year. The couple invited seventy-five guests, most of whom were Kansas newspaper editors. Such gatherings were known to and relished by many important people across the nation. Edna Ferber, prolific novelist and friend of the Whites, wrote in 1925:

To spend twenty-four hours as the guest of the Will Whites is to have a Great Adventure; an American pil-

RIGHT: Sallie and William Allen share a quiet moment in their beloved home, ca. 1942. BELOW: On May 14, 2005, Red Rocks opened as a state historic site, welcoming the public to experience the White family's legacy and longtime residence.



grimage; and a darned good time. The White House in Emporia, Kansas is in its way (and in other ways, too) as important as the White House in Washington, D.C. . . . In that red brick house on the corner of Exchange Street the Whites have entertained every sort of person from Presidents and Princes up and down. And they have no guest book. . . .

When your world is awry and hope dead and vitality low and the appetite gone, there is no ocean trip, no month in the country, no known drug equal to the reviving quality of twenty-four hours spent on the front porch or in the sitting room of the Whites' house in Emporia. . . . Your twenty-four hours will be a mellow blend of roomy red brick house, flagged terrace, lily pond, fried chicken, books, ancient elms, four-poster beds, hot biscuits, front porch, old mahogany, deep-dish apple pie, peace, friendliness, bath-rooms, Kansas sky, French peasant china, and the best conversation to be found east (or west) of the Rockies.

For years after the renovation William Allen continued proudly to show off his home. In an interview with the *Kansas City Star* in 1931, White said,

The thing I like most about the house, in summer, is this wide porch. . . . it is roofed and is covered with vines, and it gets the breeze from every point. Everybody in town gath-



Courtesy Emporia Gazette

ers here on this porch and is welcome. I have so many social irons in the fire that I have to have this big house to meet the folks in. You might say of this house what they say of many big hotels: "A bath in every room and meals at all hours."

William Allen and Sallie Lindsay White lived at Red Rocks until their deaths in 1944 and 1950, respectively. Their son, William Lindsay White, owned the home from 1950 to 1951, when it was turned over to the White Corporation. William Lindsay, his wife, Kathrine, and their daughter, Barbara, took up residence in the home in 1955, although they continued to divide their time between Emporia and New York City.

The historic and cultural significance of Red Rocks received its full due in 1971, when the home was added to the National Register of Historic Places, and in 1976, when it was designated a National Historic Landmark. In 2001 the White Corporation donated the home to the Kansas State Historical Society. Time and use had taken some toll on the structure, but Society staff oversaw the renovations to the famous home, restoring its beauty and grandeur. With fitting ceremony, the William Allen White House reopened to the public on May 14, 2005.

Through his writings from America's heartland, small-town editor William Allen White looms particularly large in state and national politics from the 1890s through World War II. He is remembered for his debates with the Populists, his progressive campaigns, his legendary battles against the Ku Klux Klan, and his efforts to "defend America by aiding the Allies." His home and gardens, with their beautiful furnishings and memorabilia, allow us to provide a lasting memorial to the man and his descendants.

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